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IN THE UNITED STATES PATENT AND TRADEMARK OFFICE

PATENT APPLICATION OF

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FOR

ELECTRONIC CAMERA AND METHOD WITH FILL FLASH FUNCTION

Respectfully submitted,



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ELECTRONIC CAMERA AND METHOD WITH FILL FLASH FUNCTION

Field of the Invention

[0001] The present invention generally relates to electronic image capture and
5 particularly to a fill flash function for such electronic image capture.

Background of the Invention

[0002] Electronic imaging devices, such as those used in digital cameras,
typically perform image capture differently from film based cameras. Electronic
10 image capture devices typically integrate separate output signals from each
photosensitive semiconductor pixel of an array of pixels. An image capture is
typically initiated by simultaneously zeroing all of the integration values of the
pixels, and various approaches have been used for terminating the image capture
process. Such integrated values then need to be read out from each of the array
15 pixels. Problems occur in controlling the amount of time over which each of the
pixels continues to integrate sensed light signals.

[0003] Controlling the integration of such imaging devices is further complicated
by the attempt to control a fill flash function, wherein a flash unit is used for part of
the illumination of a scene including a near field object of limited brightness and a
20 far field background of greater brightness. Such image capture and pixel integration
is still further complicated by the additional need to achieve the proper balance of
illumination between natural and artificial, or flash, light sources.

Summary of the Invention

25 [0004] One embodiment of the present invention provides an electronic camera,
including an electronic image capture device adapted for capturing an image scene, a
scanning aperture shutter located to control light energy received by the electronic
image capture device from the image scene, a photocell adapted for sensing light
energy received from the image scene, and an exposure control system responsive to

the photocell and operatively connected to the scanning aperture shutter, wherein the exposure control system is adapted to control the scanning aperture shutter and a flash unit in response to sensed light energy at the photocell to control an amount of fill flash energy in relation to ambient light energy received by the electronic image capture system during image capture.

[0005] The exposure control system may be adapted to illuminate the flash unit once a predetermined amount of ambient light energy is sensed by the photocell, and also to extinguish the flash unit once a predetermined amount of infrared spectrum energy is sensed by the photocell during flash unit illumination.

[0006] The photocell may include a visible spectrum photocell and an infrared spectrum photocell, and the exposure control system may adapted to use the visible spectrum photocell to sense ambient light energy received from the image scene prior to illumination by the flash unit and to use the infrared photocell for sensing infrared spectrum energy received from the image scene during illumination by the flash unit. Also, the scanning aperture shutter may include separate apertures for the image capture device, the visible spectrum photocell and the infrared spectrum photocell.

[0007] The exposure control system may be adapted to generate control signals for a detachable flash unit, or the flash unit may be constructed integrally with the camera.

[0008] Another embodiment of the present invention includes an electronic image capture device adapted for capturing an image scene, a scanning aperture shutter located to control light energy received by the image capture device, a flash unit oriented to illuminate the image scene, a photocell unit adapted for sensing visible spectrum energy and infrared spectrum energy received from the image scene, and an exposure control system responsive to the photocell unit and operatively connected to the scanning aperture shutter and the flash unit, wherein the exposure control system is adapted to control an amount of fill flash energy received from the image scene in relation to visible ambient light energy received from the

image scene during image capture by illuminating the flash unit once a predetermined amount of ambient visible spectrum energy is sensed by the photocell unit and by extinguishing the flash unit once a predetermined amount of infrared energy is sensed by the photocell unit.

5 **[0009]** The visible spectrum and infrared spectrum photocells may be separate devices, and the shutter may include separate, proportionately operable, variable apertures for the image capture device and the photocell unit. Also, the flash unit may be a quenchable strobe light.

10 **[0010]** Yet another embodiment of the present invention provides a method for electronic image capture using a fill flash function, comprising the steps of using a scanning aperture shutter to control light energy received by an electronic image capture device, sensing visible ambient light energy and infrared energy received from an image scene, and controlling the scanning aperture shutter and a flash unit during image capture in response to the sensing to cause a predetermined ratio of fill
15 flash light energy to ambient light energy to be received by the electronic image capture device including illuminating the flash unit once a predetermined amount of ambient light energy is sensed during image capture.

20 **[0011]** The step of sensing may use an infrared spectrum photocell for sensing infrared energy received from the image scene during illumination by the flash unit, and further may use a visible light spectrum photocell for sensing ambient light energy received from the image scene before illumination by the flash unit.

25 **[0012]** The step of controlling may include extinguishing the flash unit once a predetermined amount of infrared spectrum energy is sensed during flash unit illumination. Also, scanning aperture shutter may include separate, proportionately operable, variable apertures for image capture and the step of sensing.

Brief Description of the Drawings

[0013] The present invention is illustratively shown and described in reference to the accompanying drawings, in which:

[0014] Fig. 1 is a representational side view diagram of an electronic camera constructed in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention as it would be used for image capture;

5 [0015] Fig. 2 is a representational front view of a blade shutter suitable for use with the camera of Fig. 1;

[0016] Fig. 3 is a representational front view of another blade shutter suitable for use with the camera of Fig. 1; and

[0017] Fig. 4 is a graph of light energy captured by the camera of Fig. 1, verses time.

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Detailed Description Of The Drawings

[0018] Fig. 1 shows an electronic camera 10 generally including an electronic image capture device 12, a scanning aperture shutter 14, imaging optics 16, a photocell 18 and an exposure control system 20. Attached to camera 10 is a removable flash unit 22. Camera 10 forms an electronic image capture system by using imaging optics 16, such as a lens, to focus an image scene of received light from a field of view 24, on image capture device 12. Scanning aperture shutter 14 is located between imaging optics 16 and image capture device 12 to control the amount of image light received by image capture device 12.

20 [0019] Photocell 18 is directed to sense light energy received from a substantially similar field of view 26, as determined by a separate optical element 28. Light energy received by photocell 18 passes through, and is likewise controlled by shutter 14. In this manner, the light energy sensed by photocell 18 is analogous to the light energy received by image capture device 12.

25 [0020] Exposure control system 20 is coupled to photocell 18 and is adapted to responsively control shutter 14 and image capture device 12 to control the amount of light energy received from flash unit 22 during image capture.

[0021] Image capture device 12 may be constructed in any suitable manner, such as in the form of a CCD, which is the best available embodiment at the time of this

application. Also, although flash unit 22 is shown as a removable attachment to camera 10, it may also be constructed as an integral part of camera 10, as represented by phantom lines 23.

[0022] As is frequently the case, an image scene 30 may include a near-field object 32 set against a far-field background 34, wherein the natural illumination of far-field background 34 is greater than that of near-field object 32. In this case, a fill flash function is used to provide greater illumination to the near-field object 32 and thereby balance the lighting of the entire photo for better composition. Fill flash is even more frequently used to minimize shadow areas in near field objects. For these purposes, exposure control system 20 is adapted to control the amount of fill flash energy received from flash unit 22 in relation to ambient light energy received during an image capture.

[0023] Fig. 2 is a representational front view of one form of scanning aperture shutter 14, called a blade shutter, which may be used with the camera 10 (Fig. 1). Shutter 14 typically includes a pair of rigid shutter blades 40, 42, which are adapted for relative lateral movement in the direction of arrows 44 by means of an electromechanical actuator 45. Front blade shutter 40 includes apertures 46, 48, and rear blade shutter 42 includes apertures 47, 49, shown in phantom. Aperture pair 46, 47 are intended for image capture and are aligned with image capture device 12 (Fig. 1). Aperture pair 48, 49 are intended for exposing photocell 18 (Fig. 1) to incident image light energy and are therefore intended to be aligned with photocell 18.

[0024] The relative lateral movement of shutter blades 40, 42 causes aperture pairs 46, 47 and 48, 49 to progressively overlap and thereby increase the aperture size for incident light energy. The separate aperture pairs 46, 47 and 48, 49 are proportionately sized so that any relative positioning of shutter blades 40, 42 results in generally the same proportion of light energy emitted through aperture pairs 46, 47 and 48, 49. Thus, the amount of light energy sensed by photocell 18 generally represents the same proportion of the light energy emitted through aperture pair 46, 47, regardless of the position of shutter blades 40, 42. In this manner, shutter 14

includes separate, proportionately operable, variable apertures 46, 47 and 48, 49 for image capture device 12 and photocell 18. The art of constructing blade shutters is well developed and many variations from the art may be used with the present invention. Although lateral movement of shutter blades 40, 42 is described,
5 alternative forms of movement, such as rotational, may be used. Likewise, relative shapes and sizes may be varied in accordance with known methods. Although Fig. 2, depicts a single photocell aperture, more than one may be used, and their orientation may vary.

[0025] Fig. 3 shows a front view of another pair of blade shutters 50, 52, which
10 include an aperture pair 54, 55 for image capture and separate aperture pairs 56, 57 and 58, 59 to accommodate a visible spectrum photocell 60 and an infrared spectrum photocell 62, respectively. Aperture pair 56, 57 are associated with a monitoring aperture pair 64, which is shown as a single aperture, but is actually a separate aperture in each aperture blade 50, 52. Monitoring aperture pair 64 is designed to be
15 open while aperture pair 54, 55 is closed to allow ambient light monitoring of an image scene prior to image capture. Both aperture pairs 56, 57 and 58, 59 are shaped to provide an analogous representation of the opening of image capture aperture pair 54, 55. The relative orientation of the aperture pairs varies between Figs. 2 and 3 as the orientation of image capture device 12 and photocell 18 may vary in the
20 embodiment of Fig. 1.

[0026] Thus any suitable arrangement of apertures may be used, depending upon the specific photocell arrangement employed. Photocell 18 may take any suitable form such as separate visible spectrum and infrared spectrum photocells, or a single unit adapted to separately sense visible and infrared spectrum energy.

[0027] Fig. 4 is a graph, over the exposure time of an image capture, of the
25 amount of light energy admitted through image capture aperture pair 46, 47 (Fig. 2) to thereby form an image on image capture device 12 (Fig. 1). Fig. 4 represents the operation of camera 10 (Fig. 1) in the fill flash mode, wherein the total light energy used for image capture is a mixed proportion of ambient scene illumination and fill

flash. As mentioned, photocell 18 senses an analogous amount of received light during image capture. Whereas the instantaneous value of curve 68 represents the light level being received, the area 70, 72 under the graph represents the amount of light energy received over time. In this manner, by monitoring and integrating the output of photocell 18, exposure control system 20 can determine, in real time, the amount of image capture light energy incident upon image capture device 12.

[0028] A well known fill flash function typically uses ambient scene illumination to provide approximately 75% of the image capture light energy and the fill flash function to provide the remaining 25 % of image capture energy. This distribution may be varied by image scene. For controlling this distribution, exposure control system 20 monitors and integrates the output of photocell 18 until the integrated area 70 under curve 68 reaches approximately 70% of the necessary amount of image capture light energy. At this point 74, flash unit 22 is illuminated and the amount of incident light energy sensed by photocell 18 increases, very steeply. At some point 76, exposure control system 20 determines that 90 to 95% of the desired image capture light energy has been received and exposure control system 20 quenches flash 22 and closes shutter 14. In a this manner, flash unit 22 may have a variable light output, and exposure control system 20 may be adapted to limit such variable light output in response to light energy sensed by photocell 18.

[0029] The rising slope of the left side of curve 68 represents the increasing aperture size of a scanning aperture shutter. It can be appreciated, that in low-light image scenes, the scanning aperture shutter may open to its maximum aperture before approximately 70% of the image capture energy has been sensed or received. In this situation, exposure control system 20 may be programmed to illuminate flash unit 22 to allow the 25% flash contribution to be collected. Shutter 14 may subsequently be left open after flash unit 22 is quenched, so that ambient light is further admitted to reach the preferred distribution. Ambient light received during flash illumination may not be measurable because of visible spectrum flash illumination, but it may be factored into the measurement.

[0030] It is known in flash unit technology that the amount of infrared flash energy reflected by objects is more consistent between various objects than the amount of visible spectrum energy. For this reason, the present invention preferably uses an infrared photocell for measuring image scene energy during flash
5 illumination, and those measurements are converted to appropriate visible spectrum values or otherwise factored into the overall light measurement in accordance with methods known in the art. The art of exposure control devices for cameras is well developed, and various physically different devices may be constructed in accordance with known methods to implement the functions of the exposure control
10 system of the present invention.

[0031] The present invention is illustratively described above in reference to the disclosed embodiments. Various modifications and changes may be made to the disclosed embodiments by persons skilled in the art without departing from the scope of the present invention as defined in the appended claims.